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AUTHOR Crawford, Iain
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ABSTRACT

This paper offers the perspective of one chair of a large English department in a medium-sized regional comprehensive institution on the practicalities of implementing departmental assessment and program change. The discussion focuses on the complex ways in which institutional engagement, state politics, and demographic change interact, and it especially examines the role of a regional agency, the New England Regional Conference on Higher Education (NERCHE), in supporting chairs to move their departments on with assessment even as they themselves are helped to grow into leadership roles. NERCHE brings together chairs from various departments, disciplines, and institutions; focuses on year-long themes; and combines the discussion of hands-on practicalities with introduction to various kinds of research. The paper looks at how a department chair can promote and foster assessment and discusses the kinds of internal and external support that are available, and critical, to a chair's success in this endeavor. It concludes that NERCHE offers a special and invaluable combination of professional development for both the department and its leadership. (SM)

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THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER: DEPARTMENT CHAIRS AND DEVELOPING A QUALITY CULTURE FOR DEPARTMENT ASSESSMENT

Iain Crawford

I. crawford

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THE LONELINESS OF THE LONG DISTANCE RUNNER: DEPARTMENT CHAIRS AND DEVELOPING A QUALITY CULTURE FOR DEPARTMENT ASSESSMENT

Iain Crawford

Last summer, at the Denver meeting of AAHE, a presenter in one of the sessions I attended posed a seemingly innocent question to the audience: how many of your campuses have developed a wholesale culture of assessment? Not a hand went up. Now, this session did come late in the program, and whether its placing had something to do with the response I can't be sure. But what we be certain of is the fact that, though much has been achieved to make assessment an integral part of American academic life, there is still a long way to go before the process as a whole finds a secure place in the hearts and minds of college and university faculty. The current situation is clearly mixed, as our focus today on departmental evaluation shows. On the one hand, my fellow presenters have shown how much knowledge is out there and how much assistance is available to those interested in becoming engaged in departmental assessment. John Wergin, in reporting from his study for the Pew Charitable Trusts, has done much to identify and classify agents of effective assessment and, by implication, program change at the department level. And in her account of NERCHE and its programs, Deb Hirsch gives us a sense of the essential supporting role a regional agency can offer to individual campuses and departments. On the other hand, the key question remains: what **does** happen when the rubber meets the road? How do assessment and program development occur at the department level, especially in a state whose political climate both encourages and simultaneously places difficulties in the way of innovative practice? My role here today is to offer one departmental perspective on the practicalities of

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implementing assessment and program change. What I have to report from the trenches is a two-fold narrative: first, of the complex ways in which institutional engagement, state politics, and demographic change interact, and, secondly, of the role NERCHE plays in supporting chairs move a department on with assessment even as they themselves are helped to grow into leadership roles.

My current position is as chair of a large English department in a medium-sized regional comprehensive institution. Bridgewater State College, not to be confused with either Bridgewater College in Virginia or Bridgeport University in Connecticut, is a Masters I institution located some twenty-five miles south of Boston. Founded in 1840, it was the first Normal school in the country and has followed the traditional evolutionary path on to state teachers college and then to its current status as a teaching university. With some 9,000 students and a faculty primarily committed to teaching yet also increasingly active in scholarship, it is, in many ways, typical of the major class of institutions that it represents. Where it is a little unusual is in its location within a distinctive state political climate: as one unit in the nine-member state college system, it operates under a collective bargaining agreement and, in Massachusetts, that of course means engagement in the peculiarly sanguine nature of the Commonwealth's political culture. Above all, it means that the faculty have often been, as a result of the antagonistic relationship between their union and state political leadership, locked into an oppositional posture on many issues of assessment and innovation. To give you some sense of the local climate, I might note that twenty-one months after our previous contract expired we are still without a new one; that the Commonwealth bargaining team's initial proposal was to move faculty to a five/five load, with any alternative

assignments having to be made up by faculty teaching overloads, and that, with a short-lived exception last spring, our union has responded by withdrawing its participation from governance. Those of you who pass through Logan Airport regularly will perhaps remember how much the image of the lobster, with its resistant carapace and snapping claws, dominates the gift shops—you should understand that the text is not merely fortuitous, the symbolism not entirely empty. . . The question, then, that I want to address for you is, how in this context does a department chair promote and foster assessment? What kinds of internal and external support are available, and critical, to a chair's success in this endeavor?

If we look at John Wergin's study, we see four key recommendations: first, the need for institutions to be proactive in discussions of quality; second, the efficacy of decentralizing unit evaluation; third, the importance of a professionalizing of assessment as part of the developmental growth of faculty, chairs, and administrators; and fourth, the essential role of internal institutional motivation for and commitment to the process of evaluation. Despite the difficulties of our larger context within the politics of higher education in Massachusetts, locally many of these prerequisites have been met at Bridgewater State. Proactive commitment to questions of quality has been a hallmark of the leadership of our current President and Provost. It has, for example, been expressed through the fostering of cooperative learning initiatives, the development of learning communities, and, currently, the first steps we are taking towards developing service learning. While evaluation is contractually defined only in terms of individual faculty and chairs, institutional initiatives to encourage departments to embark on program reviews have begun to create, step by step, a climate of change-oriented assessment that can occur

within, or around, the framework of a contractual structure. That I—and other of my colleagues--are here at this meeting, for example, is an instance to our administration's commitment to foster leadership in the college faculty and, especially, its chairs.

Set against this commitment to evaluation and assessment, however, is the weight of inertia. When I joined my department in 1995, for example, the average length of service among my colleagues was 19 years—five years on, well, I think you can do the math. The wealth of experience and depth of institutional memory such a faculty carry has, of course, much to recommend it, and it is clear that we enjoy, and our students benefit from, the long-term commitment to and bonding with the college that most of our senior faculty feel. At the same time, of course, such longevity also has the potential to create stasis as much as stability, and a glance at our catalog pages from ten or even twenty years ago reveals far more consistency than any discipline should find comforting. For me, hired in as external chair, the greatest challenge has been to find ways to establish a culture of assessment that will lead to programmatic change. What has helped me more than anything is the other side of that demographic coin: retirements.

Like many other institutions, ours is in the midst of demographic transition as the great wave of faculty hiring from the late 60's and early 70's begins to ebb away into retirement. In our case, we have seen more than 25% of the faculty in Arts and Sciences move on in the past four years, while in English alone a third of the department has been hired since my arrival. More than anything else, this generational transition has created the impetus and opportunity for assessing, as Wordsworth put it to the leech-gatherer, who it is we are, and what it is we do. Laying down the foundation for a new generation of faculty gives institutions, and department chairs, an extraordinary opportunity to map

out strategic directions for the next ten or twenty years. Moreover, as we carry through these hires we find ourselves bringing on board faculty attuned to the rapidly changing world in which our students have to live and work, sensitive to the need to measure academic performance itself, to consider what programs actually achieve, and in general able and willing to see more closely than has perhaps been the case in the past how the academy and the society of which it is an expression are actually connected.

And this thought takes me back to that very Commonwealth that in my earlier remarks may have seemed so Cromwellian in its rampant disregard for those whose opinions differ from the established line. Even while we do indeed exist in an antagonistic political climate, that antagonism stems in part from the state Board of Higher Education's activism: its initiatives on entrance standards, mid-point student assessment, productivity review, and, above all, on the MECT—the Massachusetts Teacher tests that brought us so much notoriety two years ago--have all combined to create a climate in which our institutions are required to respond to the larger national initiatives in assessment and performance measurement. Paradoxically, then, we find that the state which is one sense our primary opponent is, in another way, our most helpful ally as an agent of change. But the paradox has had, as one might expect, mixed outcomes, since it is inevitably difficult for faculty to have a positive response to state political leadership that is consistently hostile to the public institutions. Given this general context, department chairs, who are also union members, find that their role as the immediate initiator of change places them in a situation that is, to say the least, highly problematic.

Here is where an organization such as NERCHE has an invaluable role to play. Free from specific institutional identity and outside the agonistic sphere of state politics in higher ed, NERCHE has grown into an extraordinary resource for chairs in all their work but especially in assessment, program change, and the issues that arise in departments committed to these processes. As Deb has described, NERCHE brings together chairs from a variety of departments, disciplines, and institutions, focuses on yearlong themes, and combines the discussion of hands-on practicalities with introduction to the kinds of research John's work exemplifies. With this combination, the DCTT is able to do more than even such other fine resources as the discipline-based chairs seminars many professional organizations run or the annual Orlando conference for chairs. For what the DCTT offers is a sustained conversation between colleagues who grow to know one another well over the course of a year or longer, and who, with support from the NERCHE staff and specialist consultants, largely construct their own learning about the nature of the chair's role, its responsibilities and its challenges.

To put this in more specific terms, I and my fellow chairs have been able to draw upon our experiences at NERCHE in a variety of ways that are relevant to the assessment and review process in which our departments are engaged: for example, we have enjoyed guest appearances by John, by a specialist in legal issues, and by the VPAAs' think tank (actually, I think they thought we were the guests, but that's another story). All these have all been invaluable opportunities to learn more about larger issues that affect all departments and that tend to become more acute as we are involved in extensive hiring which in turn encourages us to actively assess our programs and to initiate program change. Or again, our peer-lead discussion such issues as mentoring junior faculty,

assisting senior colleagues nearing retirement, and working with part-time faculty have all had relevance not only to our everyday managerial practices but also to the fostering of transition and change that accompanies assessment and review. All in all, the DCTT experience is thus a rich one, built upon a strong blend of expertise and collegiality. As such it provides an invaluable resource for the chair committed to fostering a culture of assessment.

To exemplify this out of my own experience, NERCHE's support has provided me with both a conceptual framework for my work and a professional network of expertise upon which to draw. Encouraged by the administrators who hired me, I began departmental assessment activities five years ago, focusing initially upon our writing programs, since these had the widest impact upon the college. (I should add that I, and other chairs, have undertaken these local initiatives without a wholesale framework for college-wide assessment and review.) I then moved, just under two years ago, to asking my department to take on comprehensive evaluation of its undergraduate and graduate programs, a process we will conclude in just a few weeks with the assistance of an external reviewer. My disciplinary professional organization, ADE, was my first resource in these efforts, and it both provided a body of knowledge about program review in English studies and lead me to the three consultants with whom we have worked. Building on that focused base, my experience with NERCHE has given me a far broader framework and the opportunity for continuous support through the contact it offers with the large and diverse group of chairs, senior administrators, and expert consultants with whom we work. Put simply, from the disciplinary organization I gain enormous immediate, specialist support. What NERCHE adds to that is the opportunity to develop a

larger understanding of the issues associated with assessment, access to specific kinds of support and assistance, and the opportunity for ongoing discussion with my fellow-chairs in the course of our regular meetings.

Inevitably, such an experience also proves an invaluable model for chair development. While our focus here today is explicitly on department assessment, the practical reality of things is that this process cannot occur without effective leadership from the chair. And one of the extraordinary inconsistencies in higher education leadership is the contrast between the depth of responsibility vested in department chairs and the astonishing absence of mechanisms that would prepare and develop individuals for a role so fundamentally different from that of the faculty member. What NERCHE's DCTT does is to fill this gap, providing an occasion in which chairs can reflect upon their craft even as they practice it and, just as important, can develop a professional network that reaches beyond their institution and even their discipline. In this way, NERCHE meets a need that is no less real even though it is rarely articulated, and, in so doing, I believe that it is helping lay down a foundation of achievement in departments throughout New England.

Finally, if there is a downside to all this good work, it may be that of being too successful. After all, a professionalized chair may become an ambitious chair. And what do you do with a chair who develops a taste for the unlikely sweets of assessment, review, program development? The answer, I'm afraid, is that you may well see him or her evolve into something else—whether a spring butterfly here in southern California or something out of Kafka I leave you to decide. In my own case, the opportunity to work with NERCHE and the chairs and specialists with whom it has connected me has indeed

fostered the transformative impulse. And thus I should close in saying that, not only has my department been assessed and developed with NERCHE's, but so too has its chair. Just a couple of days ago my own metamorphosis occurred as I accepted a position as Dean of Liberal Arts at the University of Southern Indiana. All I can hope is that this new role does not mean I will be perceived by either my present or my future faculty as some loathsome insect. In fact, believing that service as a chair is, for many reasons, the best preparation for the work of a dean, I am convinced that what NERCHE offers is a very special, and invaluable, combination of professional development for both a department and its leadership. And so let me end both by thanking you for listening and NERCHE for what it has done to support my work and development and by hoping that my successor will develop a similarly productive relationship with the DCTT. Thank you.

Iain Crawford
Dean, School of Liberal Arts
University of Southern Indiana
8600 University Boulevard
Evansville, IN 47712

(812) 464-1855
crawford@usi.edu